

INTERROGATING DOMESTIC SPACE: FLUIDITY OF HOME IN TONI MORRISON'S TAR BABY

Dr. JIBAN JYOTI KAKOTI

Associate Professor, Golaghat Commerce College, Golaghat, Assam, India

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to explore Toni Morrison's representation of the domestic space as a contesting ground for negotiating home and identity in Tar Baby. While doing so, an attempt has been made to interrogate African Americans' idea of home and their desire to make home possible in the midst of white people. An attempt has also been made to observe how race and class divisions have their impact in shaping the internal politics of the domestic space. Further attempts have been made to showcase how the domestic space is converted into a space of resistance by the blacks in order to make possible a home where difference is not allowed to be subsumed by homogeneity. This has led us to interrogate how the "homing desire" prompts the blacks to convert their masters' house into home for them thereby negotiating the master/slave binaries with a third alternative, whether an "achieved" or a "desired" one.

KEYWORDS: Domestic Space, Fluidity, Home, Interrogating, Negotiating, Resistance & Third Alternative

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INTRODUCTION

Home and space are two interrelated concepts. While as a concept the idea of home may move beyond the ambit of the place called home, the spatial dimension of home reinforces this fluidity of home by extending it to other spatial scales. The geographical character of home is manifested in the use of the term "spatial imaginary" by Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling to describe home. This expression affirms that various ideas and feelings associated with home are determined by the context in which it can be imagined and experienced. These feelings and ideas "construct places, extend across spaces and scales, and connect places" (Blunt and Dowling 2). Such multifarious notions of home affect the identities of its inmates in relation to the locations of their home. The multiple identities consequent upon such situations lend fluidity to power dynamics. The fluidity of home is also manifested in the intersection of private and public spheres in the domestic space. In other words, the feelings associated with the concept and experiences of home are both private and public. This interface between private and public spheres is intentionally obscured in the conceptualization of the colonial home, if not in praxis. The actual experience rather makes conspicuous the political dimension associated with the structure and maintenance of such a home. For McClintock, the hierarchical division of the domestic space is reminiscent of colonial division of territories (168). Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* demonstrates that given the predicament of the colonized people, home becomes a space of exploitation as well as resistance for them. African Americans, living in the midst of the larger white culture, have to negotiate between the ideal image of white home, and the actual life lived by them in the domestic space. On the other hand, in *Tar Baby* we witness quite a different picture of home when self-exiled white people come across an environment inimical to the one dictated by the supremacist white culture. An altogether different predicament, engendered by their "homing desire" in the new environment with the help of their black servants, makes the home

making process more nuanced and complicated. Their search for home is here replete with the black people's desire for home so much so that the blacks are prompted to convert their masters' house into home. Both the parties have to negotiate the master/slave binaries with a third alternative, whether an "achieved" or a "desired" one.

DISCUSSIONS

Tar Baby shows Valerian Street, a self-exiled white American from Philadelphia, trying hard to convert his newly owned house L'Arbe de la Croix at Isle des Chevaliers, a Caribbean island, into a home with the help of his wife Margaret and black servants such as Sydney, Ondine, Gideon, and Therese. Margaret cannot feel at home in this house far away from Philadelphia and, therefore, she keeps on visiting her homeland frequently. In fact, she had "the illusion that they still lived in the states but were wintering near Dominique". Interestingly, her husband encouraged her fantasy by making the occasional observation: "It can wait till we get home" (*Tar Baby* 13). When Valerian tells her that "[I]ots of people live in two places", she replies that she wants to live in one place, not to be in a constant move between Caribbean Isle des Chevaliers and Philadelphia. Her oscillating situation comes to the fore in the following statement:

"I live in airplanes now. Nowhere. Not in Philadelphia where I at least have friends. Not here boiling under a palm tree with nobody to talk to" (28).

On the other hand, Ondine is in love with that place and wants to be sure that they remain in the place forever. But Ondine has always been in a state of doubt whether Valerian would stay in Isle des Chevaliers or would leave for another place, say the States. It is because of the fact that while she rules over the kitchen and gives it a permanent look, the other parts of the house give the impression that it is a hotel from which people might leave at any moment. She, therefore, wants to know from her husband whether they are going to live permanently here. Sydney replies that since Valerian is sure to live in the place till his death, there is no question of their leaving this house. Unlike Sydney and Ondine, Jadine does not consider L'Arbe de la Croix her home, and initially wants to make a home in Paris with her European boyfriend Ryk, and then with Son in New York. It is interesting to note that Jadine feels more at home at the hotel in New York in which she stayed with Son for sometimes, and felt "unorphaned" in his company. Valerian's son Michael also does not stay with his parents possibly because of his terrible memory of this home associated with his childhood.

It is, therefore, clear that only three persons are permanent in that huge mansion—Ondine, Sydney, and Valerian. While Ondine and Sydney occupy the kitchen from which they supervise the rest of the house, Valerian occupies the greenhouse leaving the main house to the care and supervision of his servants. While these people are occupying marginal spaces in the house, the central spaces of the house are used and manipulated by less permanent members like Margaret and Jadine, and outsiders like Son, the black intruder to the house. The power dynamics of Valerian's home thus oscillates between the master and the servants or between the centre and the margin. As a white man and master of the house, Valerian is expected to have absolute control over his home. But his self-detachment from the centre of his home and his unavoidable dependence on his servants make him vulnerable to the wishes and desires of other occupants of his home. The menus of his meals and that of his wife, for example, are sometimes dictated by his cook and his butler, who make Valerian "drink Postum" instead of coffee, and offend Margaret by serving her fresh pineapples instead of mangoes. Margaret is provoked to exclaim: "They tell us what to eat. Who's working for who?" (*Tar Baby* 23).

Toni Morrison interrogates the black/white or master/slave binaries by making both the master and the servants occupy marginal spaces of L'Arbe de la Croix and vie for controlling the centre of that home. Neither Valerian nor his

servants are ready to leave the house because they have already converted that house into their home. Here is a home which is owned by a white master but is, ironically, controlled by his black servants. Though Jadine talked to Ondine and Sydney about her plan of starting a business of her own in New York, a business that “they could all do together so they could live together like a family at last”, she realized that “nothing would pull them away from the jobs they had had for thirty years or more’ (*Tar Baby* 49).

Mr. and Mrs. Street’s relationship with Jadine is somewhat different from their relationship with Sydney and Ondine, whom they regard as their servants and want them to act and behave like that. While initially Mrs. Street started a friendly relationship with Ondine and enjoyed confiding with her in the kitchen, Mr. Street wanted his wife to act like the mistress of the house. But he didn’t object to his wife’s mixing up with Jadine. Sydney was able to perfectly describe their relationship to Valerian when he said, “They get along fine, like each other’s company, both of them” (*Tar Baby* 19). Jadine’s western education, her beauty, and her career as a model in Europe, made her acceptable to them, and she was treated almost in equal terms with them. On the other hand, Ondine and Sydney were expected to behave like servants, and any deviation was always discouraged.

Being a self-exiled person and depending entirely on the help of his butler and the cook, Valerian’s attempt to maintain his L’Arbe de la Croix as a colonial mansion gives way to a situation where power dynamics are constantly in flux. The resulting spatial politics of home paves the way for a third space — a space of resistance as well as reconciliation and beyond. Here resistance starts initially in their difference of opinions and attitudes, but it gradually deepens with the arrival of Son, the ‘chocolate-eater’, and culminates in the reversal of power dynamics with Sydney’s drinking of Valerian’s wine without taking the latter’s permission.

Multiple possibilities emerge in that third space where black-white, master-servant binaries are negotiated and power dynamics are interrogated. When Theres and Gideon are fired by Valerian, he is not expected, as the owner of the house, to confer with his servants before making this decision. But that is what Ondine demands from her master. She argues that she cannot run the kitchen without her assistant. Valerian should, therefore, have consulted her before taking such a decision. Valerian, in a feat of rage, orders Ondine and Sydney to leave the house—an order which reflects his desperation more than his intent. The order was, however, not taken seriously by any of the parties. This is evident from the fact that “[i]t was the second time he ordered a dismissal and the second time it held no force” (*Tar Baby* 207).

The ideal image of white colonial home Valerian tries to maintain gets an unexpected jolt in Ondine’s divulging of the secret of Margaret’s sadism in her physical torture of her son Michael when he was just a baby. The initial friendship between Margaret and Ondine, and Son and Jadine, are, no doubts, intimate moments of home, but these are also alien feelings challenging the ideal image of white home. Similarly, while Margaret’s calling Ondine a “nigger” in the crucial moment of crisis displays the colonial mentality of the colonizer, subscribing at the same time to the avowed ideals of colonial home. Ondine’s slapping of Margaret presents an alien but assertive moment of resistance in the same home.

The structure and spatial division of Valerian’s home remind us of Sara Mill’s observation about colonial bungalows where colonial practices in public life overlap with that of private life in these bungalows: “private life was lived as if always in public” (114). The only difference is that while colonial practices in “public sphere” almost invariably involve the display of power and violence in a more prominent way, the colonial practices of home do not entail such conspicuous display of dominating mentalities. They are rather reduced to the minimum and symbolic level. Though Ondine and Sydney are made to live in the periphery of L’Arbe de la Croix, they gradually move to the centre of the home

thereby affecting a reversal in the exercise of power. This happens in spite of occasional display of colonial mentality on the part of their master and an equally powerful, if not more, reactions on their part to such outbursts. The lived domestic space of Valerian's home thus produces counter-spaces as a resistance to colonial appropriation of domestic space, or more precisely, colonial discourses, where "my" home of Valerian turns into "our" home. It paves the way for a peaceful coexistence based on mutual respect and coordination between the master and the servants.

The long and constant presence of black workers in white home evokes a sense of belongingness in their minds, and a negotiated relationship between the white and the black starts developing. The development of a "quasi-familial" relation between Sydney, Ondine, and Jadine, on the one hand, and Valerian and Margaret, on the other, is a case in point. It sometimes appears that the black people feel more at home in Valerian's home than the white people. While Sydney and Ondine regard L'Arbe de la Croix as their home, Margaret has the illusion that they are on a vacation here and soon they will leave the place. However, the intimacy and closeness between the people of the two races paves the way for a "friend-like" relation between them. This is evident in the evolving of such a relation between Margaret and Ondine just after the former's marriage to Valerian. Then, towards the end of the novel, Margaret tries to convince Ondine to resume such a friendly relationship between them. Margaret says:

We could have been friends, Ondine. Like at first when I used to come in your kitchen and eat your food and we laughed all the time. Didn't we, Ondine? Didn't we use to laugh and laugh. Didn't we? I have it right, don't I? (*Tar Baby* 240).

It is interesting to note that their initial friendship broke up because of Valerian's interference, and particularly, at a time when both the ladies enjoyed each other's company very much. Afterward, it was Margaret who desperately needed Ondine's friendship, and wanted to revive it. But, this time, Ondine was not interested in revitalizing such a relationship because she thought it was already almost too late (241). Such situations ultimately lead the master and the servants to develop a negotiated relationship— Sydney negotiating with Valerian for a permanent settlement in the island home of L'Arbe de la Croix based on mutual love and respect, and Margaret negotiating with Ondine for a relationship between them on equal terms. Margaret, in particular, notices some affinity between them. This affinity rests on the predicament that both of them are childless now and, therefore, there is a possibility that they can become friends (241).

The street family is so much dependent on their servants for almost everything that sometimes they feel the servants are not at all manageable. Valerian asks the most crucial question: "Whose house is this?" (*Tar Baby* 206). That Sydney has gradually exercised full control over Valerian is evident in his turning off the music Valerian was listening. He also drinks Valerian's wine, and negotiates with him to make him stay in the island in spite of his desire to go back to Philadelphia. Sydney did not give any heed to Valerian's demand: "It's my place . . . Turn the music back on" (285). Nor did Sydney stop drinking even though Valerian reminded him that he was drinking his [Valerian's] wine. When Valerian was intent on going back to Philadelphia, Sydney responded by saying, "I figure we're going to be here a long time, Mr. Street" (287). He was able to convince him to stay on that place by offering him the best of their services. Valerian's reaction to this suggestion of Sydney foregrounds the former's hapless situation as the master of a house which he cannot run without the assistance and guidance of his servants. He cannot help taking them into confidence not, of course, without good reasons. In fact, it appears that Valerian was desperately expecting such assertions from Sydney because as soon as that suggestion was made, and the music was turned on back, Valerian gave smile of satisfaction and started moving his fingers in the air in response to the rhythm of the music (287).

It is interesting to note that Ondine feels more at home in this place than her mistress Margaret, who has always the fancy of leaving the place and settling in the States. Even Sydney feels that it is the only home that they must hang on to and claim as their own. Ondine is so much attached to the kitchen that she begins to feel it as her kitchen, and takes Gideon and Therese as her help. She, in fact, astonishes Valerian by making the following declaration: "Yes my kitchen and yes my help. If not mine, whose?" (*Tar Baby* 207). When the servants, having no other alternative but to have a vague and self-deceiving dream of having their own home somewhere sometimes, try to convert their master's home to their own home, the rigidity of racial or class divide is diluted to the extent that the balancing of power is problematized, and the fluidity of domestic space is foregrounded. It also justifies the argument that space is not a neutral container against which social relations are played out, but is capable of producing social relations. Valerian tries to maintain the domestic space as absolute, forgetting that, as Lefebvre has said, once it is lived, it becomes "colonized" and "relativised". The mythical character of Valerian's colonized domestic space is revealed in the reversal of power dynamics in his home, which exposes the inherent fluidity and multiplicity of space in general, and domestic space in particular.

CONCLUSIONS

Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* demonstrates that the colonial division of private and public spheres is in reality a myth. It is evident from the fact that the few colonized, who have access to such a colonial home as domestic servants, cooks, etc., experience the intersection of private and public spheres in the domestic space. It is manipulated in the manner of managing wider colonial territories on the basis of stratification. Valerian's colonial home in *Tar Baby* is maneuvered to the extent of allowing these outsiders restricted and limited access to only specific parts of it. But once the dependability of the owners of the colonial home on the services provided by the colonized people is recognized by the latter, the myth of the colonial appropriation of the domestic space becomes evident and the fluidity of home is somewhat restored. These service providers start taking control of certain spaces of the home although that control may be only partial and temporary. This is what colonial representation of home ignores and postcolonial representation highlights. The postcolonial representation of colonial home foregrounds the fluid and multiple ways of inhabiting the domestic space depending on the nature of the interface between the private and the public spheres. Such representations challenge colonial idea of rigid black/white and master/slave binaries.

Colonial demarcation of territories with its concomitant display of violence and power in the public sphere is attenuated to certain extent in the colonial home. The domestic servants and other service providers are able to occupy a space of significance commanding at least certain recognition from the owners of such homes. As Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* so ingeniously demonstrates, such people are not always treated as "chaotic presence" in colonial homes (Upstone 117). What we actually come across is, in the words of Edouard Glissant, "chaos-monde" – a chaos without being chaotic (94). The resultant fluidity produces, in turn, a transformation augmented by "intermixing of cultures" (138). Such flexibility "challenges the colonial discourse of purity and unequivocal sovereignty with one of difference, contamination, and uncertainty" (Upstone 13). Such representations of colonial homes complicate, if not challenge, views of critics such as J. K. Noyes, who argues that the specific way of constructing houses in the colonies serves the purpose of using them as "a strategy of surveillance and classification" (274). Postcolonial representations of colonial homes thus expose them as locations of hybridity where the rigidity of the binary opposition between the colonizer and the colonized is diluted to pave the way for a strategic third space where negotiations are made possible.

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